



MERRINDIE MOUNTAIN RETREAT & WATSON'S MOUNTAIN COUNTRY TRAIL RIDES

Combine the adventure of horseriding in Victoria's high country
with the comfort of overnighting in a mountain chalet.



IN THE TAPESTRY of Australian myths and legends, the Victorian High Country looms large, with tales of courageous mountain horsemen and defiant bushrangers that are woven throughout our history. *The Man from Snowy River* captured the colony's imagination when Andrew Barton ('Banjo') Paterson penned his iconic verse in 1890 and prophesied that 'The man from Snowy River is a household word to-day/And the stockmen tell the story of his ride'.

Just as the 1982 film followed in the hoof prints of *The Man from Snowy River* and his fearless horse, so too does Mansfield local Michael Watson provide an authentic insight into the iconic mountain horseman's world, leading small groups on horseback through this beautiful high country region on Watson's Mountain Country Trail Rides. "There's great job satisfaction for us to share this very special part of the world," Michael says. "It is a fantastic experience."

Michael has joined forces with ex-AFL star Craig Kelly, whose sumptuous holiday home – Merrindie Mountain Retreat – offers guests a luxurious overnight haven, with an exquisite meal and a comfortable bed the perfect antidote to a day in the saddle. The first sight of the chalet-like Merrindie quickens the pulse, with the anticipation of arriving somewhere special indeed. The approach road threads over a hill to reveal a sweeping panorama in which Merrindie sits centrestage, just beneath the summit. Behind are the mountains of Victoria's Alpine National Park.

Michael, whose family has been around Mansfield for 50 years, is considered a newcomer to the area compared to Charlie Lovick, the bearded mountain cattleman who heads up the High Country Cattle Drive for Watson's Mountain Country Trail Rides. Charlie's ancestors were among the first settlers and, with the arrival of his grandson, he can point to seven generations of his family who have lived locally. In 1978, Charlie was accredited as 'Master of Horse' on the set of *The Man from Snowy River* and taught lead actor Tom Burlinson to ride in the film's famous gravity-defying hill descent.

The film *The Man from Snowy River* features a determined youth who, though treated unjustly, proves his worth with his exceptional horsemanship and great courage. While Michael may not be able to exhibit all of the character traits of a movie hero, he gives his tour groups something even greater: a real taste of the iconic high country. The horses trek along bridle paths established more than 150 years ago; the methods used to muster and drive cattle are unchanged, and the camaraderie and values of these hardy mountain dwellers are those that were forged in the same pastures discovered by their ancestors, places that only locals of the high country can call home. You can ride with them, or join them by four-wheel-drive or helicopter and, if you meet Charlie, you can ask him how they filmed that fearful descent in the film. He knows, but don't expect him to tell you. Nor will Michael.



Set in the Victorian High Country, Merrindie Mountain Retreat is the perfect base to explore the iconic Snowies, whether it's on a four-wheel-drive tour, a helicopter flight, or by horseback, just as the man from Snowy River saw it.





Nothing ends a day in the saddle better than a sunset and a long soak in the bath. Merrindie guests can wind down with a gourmet meal and a cosy room, and warm up by a hearty fireplace or share a bottle of red on the verandah.



The true scale of Merrindie Mountain Retreat is first appreciated when you approach it through the courtyard formed by two symmetrical wings reaching back from the main building. More than 14 tree trunks support open-truss beams of a cathedral ceiling in this 250-square-metre open-plan area, which encompasses several living areas, an office, a dining area and a generously equipped kitchen where gourmet meals are prepared by noted chefs, using locally sourced and seasonal ingredients when possible.

A cavernous open fireplace at one end supplements the central heating while a second fireplace features an ingenious

double-flued chimney that serves an exterior fireplace in the barbecue deck outside. There is another larger deck at the front of the building. One wing contains the master bedroom with a generous en suite bathroom and in the other wing are two double-bedrooms and a 12-bed dormitory, as well as showers, toilets and a laundry with a dedicated drying room.

All the furniture is expansive and comfortable, some with rustic themes that match the photos on the walls. There is a feeling of solidity and unpretentious permanence, as if function, luxury and style were given equal priority. It works – Merrindie Mountain Retreat is a magnificent place.





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LOCATION: Merrindie is about 10km outside of Mansfield in the north-east of Victoria.

GETTING THERE: Charter a helicopter and fly in or it's about a two-and-a-half-hour drive. Take the Hume Highway (M31) from Melbourne turning off at Tallarook to Yea on the B340, and then on to Mansfield on the B300.

WHAT'S INCLUDED: Everything (food, accommodation at Merrindie, wine, beverages, all riding equipment, travel etc) is included in the tour provided by Watson's. The rate varies according to the activities selected and choice of transport taken.

Riders recreate the descent made famous by the 1982 film based on Banjo Peterson's *The Man from Snowy River*. Or they can try their hand at mustering cattle, or netting a trout in the mountains' peaceful waters.

MAKING THE MOST OF IT: The warmer months (September-May) are the best time to visit, unless you want a truly alpine experience.

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There are a number of different tours available on horseback, by 4WD or helicopter. This enables guests to create a custom-made itinerary to suit their timeframe, interests and skill level. On multi-day tours, guests can return to Merrindie by 4WD or helicopter each evening for a gourmet meal and a comfortable bed – aligning luxury with adventure. There's also the option of sampling a cattleman's roast around a camp fire before sleeping under the stars in a traditional Australian swag for a night.

A favourite tour is the five-day High Country Cattle Drive. This starts at a working cattle property nestled at the base of the Victorian high country, where easy back roads give you the opportunity to get acquainted with the horses, indispensable allies for the adventure to follow, and good friends by its end.

The rhythm of the trail, the crack of the whip and the gentle lowing of the cattle accompany glorious panoramas over the high country and a visit to the location of the legendary downhill scene from *The Man from Snowy River*. In the following four days there are rivers to cross and open plains where the horses quicken to a canter, giving riders an exhilarating sense of the power and majesty of this expansive landscape.

There are also opportunities to swim, fish, soothe the muscles with a massage or just kick-back and prepare for the roast and stories ('short' and 'tall') around the camp fire from hosts Michael Watson or Charlie Lovick in destinations with evocative names like "Dungeon Hut", "Seeforth Station" and "The Hideout", before overnight transfers to Merrindie by 4WD or helicopter.

Ever-helpful pilot David Blunden can also fly guests to cattlemen's huts, including Craig's Hut from *The Man from Snowy River*, spotting wildlife en route in the forested hills that gradually recede to the distant horizon in this bastion of wildness and mystery. ■

